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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 KUWAIT 005186

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STATE FOR NEA/ARPI, LONDON FOR TSOU, PARIS FOR ZEYA

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NATIONAL ASSEMBLY

SUBJECT: FREEDOM AGENDA: HEATED DEBATE OVER ELECTORAL

REFORM DESPITE POSTPONEMENT OF DISCUSSION UNTIL JUNE 2006

REF: A. KUWAIT 5136

[¶](#)B. KUWAIT 5016

[¶](#)C. KUWAIT 4740

[¶](#)D. KUWAIT 4460

[¶](#)E. 04 KUWAIT 1705

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Matthew H. Tueller for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

[¶](#)11. (SBU) Summary: On December 12, the National Assembly voted to postpone discussion on proposals to reduce the number of electoral constituencies, a key political reform, until June 30, 2006 (ref A). The vote comes amid heated public debate over the issue. Top government officials recently stated publicly their support for a reduction from the current 25 constituencies to 10. The National Assembly, however, is divided on the issue: most pro-government MPs oppose the reform, while many liberal and Islamist MPs support the reduction. The majority of Kuwait's political associations also support the reduction. The Prime Minister told us privately that he does not want to see the Government take a clear position on an issue that still so evenly divides the Assembly. The National Assembly Speaker offered us his personal view that the current Assembly would not act on the issue. While supporters agree on the need for a reduction, they disagree considerably on the number and geographic distribution of the fewer districts, politically sensitive issues which could dramatically affect the composition of the National Assembly. Another seldom addressed aspect of the reform is how many votes each voter would get in the reduced districts; some proposals would offer few improvements over the current system (ref E).

[¶](#)12. (C) Supporters of the reform argue the reduction would force candidates to campaign on political issues rather than familial, tribal, or sectarian connections, and is a crucial next step towards broader political reform in the country. Many pro-reform MPs see the postponement of discussion on reduction proposals as proof of the Government's insincere support for political reform. Illustrating what is at stake, liberal columnist Dr. Ahmed Al-Rubei characterized the debate over the reduction as "a battle between the forces of democracy and those surviving on a monopolistic and corrupt system. It is a battle to free this society and its parliament from the stranglehold of corruption." End summary.

Government Publicly Backs Ten Constituencies

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[¶](#)13. (SBU) In a November 22 meeting with pro-government MPs, Prime Minister Shaykh Sabah clearly stated the Government's support for reducing the number of constituencies to ten. "The reduction will happen and there is no way to change

that," he reportedly told the MPs. Interior Minister Shaykh Nawaf Al-Ahmed Al-Jaber Al-Sabah, who heads the ministerial committee reviewing the issue (ref D), quickly echoed the Prime Minister's comments, saying the current electoral system "has encouraged tribalism, sectarianism, and factionalism."

**¶4.** (C) Minister of Public Works Bader Nasser Al-Humaidi reiterated the Government's support for the reduction in a December 7 meeting with the Ambassador, arguing that fewer districts would be "good for democracy and stability." Under the current electoral system, most MPs worry more about their own narrow interests than national interests, he said. If the reform were adopted the next National Assembly would be "very different from this one" and would be able to "act faster" on important issues, he argued.

**¶5.** (C) National Assembly Speaker Jassem Al-Khorafi both publicly and privately to the Ambassador (ref B) stated his support for ten constituencies, clarifying his previously ambiguous position on the reform. He cautioned, though, that there was "no consensus" on the geographical distribution of the fewer (but enlarged) constituencies, which he characterized as a "thorny issue." However, in a December 17 conversation with the DCM, Al-Khorafi said he doubted that the current Assembly would act on the various electoral reform proposals. He thought electoral reform would be more likely to come about after parliamentary elections in 2007.

#### National Assembly Divided

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**¶6.** (SBU) The National Assembly is divided on the issue. Nearly all pro-government MPs oppose the reduction on the grounds that it would increase support for Islamist political

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associations. Supporters of the reform argue these "service deputies" actually fear the reduction would erode their political support, which depends almost entirely on their ability to obtain government favors for their constituents. The Independent Bloc, a coalition of 18 pro-government MPs, publicly announced its strong opposition to the reform and even argued for an increase in the number of constituencies.

**¶7.** (SBU) The majority of Islamist and liberal MPs, though disagreeing on most other issues, agree the reduction is a critical component of broader political reform in the country. Chairman of the Foreign Affairs Committee, liberal MP Mohammed Jassem Al-Sager, recently argued that "the reduction...will definitely and sharply kill the phenomenon of buying votes as well as transferring registered voters from one constituency to another." Islamist Shi'a MP Dr. Hassan Jowhar said the reduction would force candidates to campaign on political platforms rather than personal relationships. Islamist MP Jassem Al-Kandari stressed the reduction was "the door to political reform" in Kuwait.

**¶8.** (SBU) There is also almost unanimous support for the reduction among Kuwait's political associations, which stand to gain politically from more issues-based elections.

#### Pro-Reform MPs Question Government Sincerity

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**¶9.** (C) Many MPs supporting electoral reform question the Government's commitment to reducing the number of constituencies. Deputy National Assembly Speaker Meshari Al-Anjari told Poloff on December 14 the vote to postpone discussion of reduction proposals "indicated the Government is not serious about political reform." Al-Anjari argued that with its 16 ministers the Government could easily pass any reduction proposal, but chose not to because it would lose influence in the National Assembly. Al-Anjari claimed the reduction would limit the widespread practices of vote buying and vote transferring. The Prime Minister offered a

different take on the influence of the Cabinet's 16 votes. In a casual conversation on the subject during the visit of former President Bush, Shaykh Sabah said the Assembly was evenly divided on electoral reform. Using the Cabinet's votes to support either wide would be divisive and would undermine public acceptance.

¶10. (C) Shi'a MP Hassan Jowhar told Poloff December 11 that the Government was not only against the reduction, but was actively working to prevent its implementation. During a December 11 meeting in support of the reduction, Islamist MP Abdullah Akkash argued that the Government's inconsistency on the issue proved it did not want the reform. This view was echoed by other MPs who attended the event. Additionally, liberal MP Ali Al-Rashed told PolChief December 18 the fact that the GOK, which had proposed the Assembly discuss the reduction proposals on February 13, voted for a June date was further proof "it was not serious about reform." He commented that a June 30 discussion date, approximately one month before the summer recess, effectively killed the issue.

#### Reduction Proposals Differ Significantly

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¶11. (SBU) While supporters of the reform agree on the need for the reduction, they disagree considerably on the number and geographic distribution of the fewer districts, politically sensitive issues which could dramatically affect the composition of the National Assembly. Proposals range from ten constituencies to one, and one proposal even calls for maintaining 25 constituencies, but allowing voters to vote in any constituency.

¶12. (C) MP Al-Anjari told Poloff he introduced a proposal to merge the current 25 constituencies into five, each with ten representatives. Under this system, each voter could cast four votes, which he argued would prevent a particular group, sect, or tribe from dominating any one constituency. The National Democratic Alliance, a liberal political association, also made the case for five constituencies. The controversial Islamist Ummah Party put forward a similar proposal, but called for the creation six districts.

¶13. (C) Shi'a MP Hassan Jowhar told Poloff he also submitted a proposal to reduce the number to five constituencies with ten representatives each. According to his proposal, each voter would be allowed to vote for three representatives, a system he said would encourage candidates to run on three-person "lists." He predicted only 15 Islamist candidates could be elected in this system, though

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he failed to explain why this was the case.

#### Female Candidates Could Benefit

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¶14. (SBU) The addition of females to the voting pool after the May 2005 passage of women's suffrage legislation is also likely to force candidates to campaign more on political issues than on "wasta" (connections). Many observers argue a reduction would also increase the possibility of female candidates being elected in the 2007 parliamentary elections, although the prevailing consensus is that women are unlikely to be elected for a variety of other reasons.

#### Shi'a Concern

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¶15. (C) Several Shi'a MPs have expressed concern that a reduction could disadvantage Kuwait's Shi'a community, approximately 287,000 of the 956,000 Kuwaiti citizens. Shi'a MP Saleh Ashour told Poloff if either of the two reduction proposals introduced by the Government last year had been adopted only "three to four" Shi'a MPs could have been elected in any election. (Note: There are currently five

Shi'a MPs in the National Assembly. End note.) Another Shi'a MP, Yousef Al-Zalzalah, has expressed similar concerns in meetings with Emboffs.

What Is At Stake?

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¶16. (U) Under the current electoral system, constituencies average 5,500 eligible voters, each being able to cast two votes; the voting system is single-round, first-two-past the post. With so few voters per constituency, electoral margins are remarkably low. Many current MPs were elected with fewer than 1,000 votes -- two by only three votes -- and well over half with fewer than 2,000 votes. If the number of constituencies were reduced to ten, there would be an average of 13,750 voters per constituency. The addition of female voters would more than double this number, drastically reducing the possibility for the sort of electoral corruption believed to be widespread. A reduction to only five constituencies, (very unlikely), would have an even greater effect.

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